

Cracks in the Self: A Poetry Collection Exploring Narcissism and Its Coping Mechanism in Youth

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ABSTRACT

When a girl grows up with an authoritarian parent, the trauma causes her to develop narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) in her young adult years, disrupting her ability to form healthy relationships with her mother, friends, and especially herself. To escape any emotional discomfort, she turns to non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) as a coping mechanism. This narrative poetry explores the progression of Renee's life from childhood to her struggle with NPD in young adulthood. It highlights how dangerous NPD is when Renee resorts to NSSI to deal with the negative reactions from others. This creative work underscores the seriousness of NPD since it may lead to a harmful coping mechanism called NSSI.

Keywords: authoritarian parenting; narcissistic personality disorder; narrative poetry; non-suicidal self-injury.

INTRODUCTION

At its core, narcissism is about self-importance, enmity, and entitlement. Narcissists believe they are more important than others and deserve to be treated as such (Campbell & Crist, 2020, Broaching section, para. 3). Narcissism is a personality trait, and it exists in a spectrum: the grandiose type, being the label for someone who is ambitious, driven, and self-centered while the vulnerable type is introverted, depressed, and easily hurt by criticism. Oftentimes, people experience these two tendencies alternately. When that narcissistic trait is not normal, extreme, or inflexible, a personality disorder can occur, which can be clinically described as narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Dr. Craig Malkin, a clinical psychologist and author of "Rethinking Narcissism," defines NPD as a disorder with pathological levels of self-absorption, vanity, and entitlement, characterized by emotional imbalance and empathy. Individuals with NPD view others as mirrors, reflecting their own self-perception, then will do anything to make others look worse than them (e.g., by damaging their reputation). They are also jealous of others' achievements, and this envy is made clear in their behavior (Malkin, 2019, p. 57).

There is an uprising trend on social media that shows narcissistic tendencies. This statement is supported by a study which says that "[N]arcissists exhibited high intensity of updating Stories on WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook" (Menon, 2022). Asian culture is becoming more individualistic (Sedikides, Ntoumanis, & Sheldon, 2018, p. 2) and narcissistic. Evidence from China (Cai, Kwan, & Sedikides, 2012) and South Korea (Lee et al., 2014) is also consistent with the latter statement. In Indonesia, narcissism also flourishes and mainly in young people. Several examples include teenagers doing dangerous prank content on TikTok (Arjawanangun, 2020), an Indonesian official's teenage son showing off his luxurious goods on social media accounts (Caesaria & Ihsan, 2023), and many more.

This topic is important to be discussed because narcissism can take the form of NPD. If left untreated, it can bring about great life challenges such as difficulties in forming healthy relationships, drug, alcohol abuse (Welker, Simons, & Simons, 2018), depression, anxiety, and

eating disorder (Waller et al, 2007). Nowadays, NPD is significantly more common among younger adults (Stinson et al., 2008) and a lot of them do not realize they have NPD. In the U.S., NPD typically occurs in 0.5% of the population. It occurs in two to sixteen percent of people who see a psychiatrist. Personality disorders are difficult to diagnose, and the prevalence number appears to be lower because people rarely seek help as they do not think they have a problem (Supriyanto, 2023). In Indonesia, it has been found that there are less than a hundred and fifty thousand cases of NPD annually (Putri, 2022).

For a true NPD diagnosis, someone must present five out of nine criteria, in such a way that they pose a serious obstacle to love or work life. The ones that will be shown in the creative work are a sense of specialness, admiration, sense of entitlement, lack of empathy, and envy. As a background to NPD, these symptoms will support and give visualization of how the main character, Renee, behaves. Next, there are many potential causes of NPD, but we are going to focus on the childhood experiences (environment) as the single cause of NPD for this creative work.

In the book, Campbell mentioned attachment theory that says children who are raised in less stable environments or less secure environments are more likely to have mental disorders or substance abuse problems. Parents who put their child on a pedestal (permissive parenting) give them excessive praise and believe that the child may be superior. In contrast, cold and controlling parents (authoritarian parenting) means showing little emotional support or affection and applying excessive control over their child's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Henschel, 2014, p. 4). The authoritarian parenting style is often more associated with an increased risk of NPD in young people (Mitra & Fluyau, 2023). Children who experience emotional neglect due to cold and controlling parents may come down with an extreme need for attention, validation, and love from others (the core of NPD). The need for external validation can contribute to the development of NPD as individuals seek admiration and recognition to compensate for the emotional void experienced during childhood (Dawood, Schroder, Donnellan, & Pincus, 2017, p. 16).

In general, NPD is known to impact one's external relationships, but it also leads one to commit non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) as a coping mechanism. The most recent definition of NSSI is "[t]he intentional, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent, and not for purposes that are socially or culturally sanctioned" (Cipriano, Cella, & Cotrufo, 2017, p. 1). The behavior includes hair pulling, self-hitting, cutting, carving words or pictures on the skin, and burning (Dawood et. al., 2017, p. 1). NSSI is often identified as a coping strategy used to control negative emotions or unpleasant cognitive states (Bentley, Nock, & Barlow, 2014; Taylor et al., 2018). The reason why a lot of young people choose to cope with NPD using NSSI is because unlike other coping methods (such as using drugs, alcohol, or binge eating), NSSI can be done swiftly, discreetly, and practically in any place (Bentley, Nock, & Barlow, 2014, p. 644).

Individuals with NPD have high expectations for themselves and others, but they also heavily depend on others for emotional control. This reliance on external validation can make them vulnerable to emotional distress when they fail to meet their own high standards or when others do not provide the admiration or recognition they seek. As a result, when faced with the failures in improving themselves or the perceived lack of needed attention or admiration, individuals with NPD may engage in NSSI behaviors as a coping mechanism. NSSI serves to manage their emotions, gain attention, or bring out concern and care from others (Dawood et al, 2017, p. 16).

The genre that we will use for the poetry book is narrative poetry. It comes in many shapes and sizes, but one thing in common is they tell stories (Bugeja, 1994, p. 216). Along with this genre, we are going to apply contemporary poetry as the style of writing. It is the style that

matches the skills and tendencies of millennials, reflecting the casual, carefree use of the internet that only millennials have (Sellers, 2016, p. 191).

With contemporary poetry, free verse often becomes the norm (Addonizio & Laux, 1997, p. 138). It often uses more accessible language familiar to modern readers (Diaz, Wilkerson, & Wimmer, 2022). Thus, by combining contemporary style and narrative poetry, we will write a poetry book that tells a relevant story to today's issues that can be understood easily. Free verse does not follow any rhyme scheme or metrical structure. According to Bugeja (1994) free verse allows poets to decide when to break a line, where to start a new stanza (a group of lines), and when to end the poem. We choose this free verse form of poetry because it is what catches people's attention nowadays and has been loved by readers in social media (Lewis, 2022).

We did secondary research for this creative work. We collected data and materials that already existed. We also made use of clinical or psychological theories that we take through journals, e-books, articles, and several other sources. We read some poems about narcissism, social media, and some narrative poems to get various perspectives and find the connection between the three. We found the first theory about narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), summarized by W. Keith Campbell in his book, *The New Science of Narcissism: Understanding One of the Greatest Psychological Challenges of Our Time—and What You Can Do About It* (2020).

For the second theory, non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), we read the research article by Dawood, Schroder, Donnellan, and Pincus (2017) entitled *Pathological Narcissism and Nonsuicidal Self-Injury*. As a coping mechanism, NSSI is used by some individuals to manage emotional pain, stress, or overwhelming emotions. Several journals and articles online also contributed to enrich our knowledge on narcissistic tendencies and NSSI, how the symptoms are dangerous to the narcissists and others in their life if being left to flourish in human interaction. In total, we have made twenty-three poems but only five of them will be discussed in this article.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

The genre of the creative work is narrative poetry. The reason we choose this genre combined with contemporary and free verse style is because we want to write a poetry book that tells a relevant story to today's issues, such as narcissism, so that it can be understood easily in young people's circle of socialization. In literature, the function of narrative poetry not only serves as a medium for storytelling and providing entertainment to audiences (Ezra, 2023) but also as a vehicle for social commentary and critique. It activates senses, connects, and encourages critical thinking about the world (Acim, 2021, p. 439). The creative work is a narrative poetry set in modern times that brings awareness to the danger of narcissism, a phenomenon widely seen in social media and can take the form of NPD.

The inspiration comes from a narrative poem by T.S. Elliot entitled *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. It tells the tale of Prufrock, a middle-aged man who is grappling with feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and a sense of inadequacy in a modern city world. Throughout the poem, he engaged in a narrative, revealing his most inner thoughts and emotions. His preoccupation with his own image was some of the elements that illustrated his narcissistic tendencies. Prufrock was hesitant to initiate conversations or romantic advances due to the fear of rejection. He was worried that others might criticize or mock him, which led to social anxiety and inhibited him from forming meaningful connections. This fear of rejection is another trait

commonly associated with narcissism, as narcissists crave for constant validation and admiration from others.

In the creative work, the main character cares a lot about her own image that it makes her sensitive to rejection from her mother and her friends. We adapt the techniques used in the poem by Eliot into the creative work to portray the emotional pressure and trauma Renee goes through after her real identity is accidentally revealed. However, there are some key differences between the poetry and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Firstly, the character Prufrock was a middle-aged man, and his perspective would only be relatable to readers of his age and above, while the character Renee is a young girl and her thoughts/behavior may be more relatable to her peers, which are our target readers.

Secondly, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* portrays the inner struggle of the main character in his directly spoken thoughts, whereas we will use a third-person point of view to express Renee's emotions. Thirdly, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* engages with the exploration of a modern individual that exhibits some narcissistic traits whereas the narrative poetry in the creative work will engage with how trauma from cold and controlling parenting can contribute to extreme narcissistic traits (NPD) in a young adult. These elements highlight the conflict and underlying cause, and we hope that it can be relatable to young people with similar experiences.

Synopsis

In this narrative, Renee conceals her true self due to her mother Nora's fame, leading to a neglected and overlooked upbringing. Struggling with NPD, Renee's difficulty in forming meaningful relationships is intensified when her identity is accidentally exposed. Surprisingly, her mother's response initially brings praise, but the lack of genuine interest causes Renee to seek validation from her peers. Her impatience, anger, belittling behavior, and resistance to criticism strain her relationships, pushing her to engage in self-harm (NSSI) as a coping mechanism. Discovery of her secret leads to therapy with her mother, resulting in progress but with lingering struggles. The story underscores the lasting impact of trauma, portraying healing as a complex and ongoing process, evident as Renee, despite progress, resorts to self-harm upon encountering her mother's busy schedule.

The Poems

1. Trophies and Echoes of Neglect (Poem 3)
 Amidst a glass storage,
 The trophies gleaming, certificates displayed
 Real achievements with her name engraved
 Renee stands, her past successes observed
 Her mother's standards, her heart's cruel pressure.
 A glass storage, Renee's sense of worth
 Half-empty, unfulfilled, and incomplete,
 It whispers, "You're not through".
 "Friends are distractions," her mother would claim,
 "Focus on your studies, and success will be your aim."
 So, Renee secluded, her world confined,
 In the name of success, her dreams were slandered.
 Her childhood memories, shaped by Nora's hand,
 Pushed her to achieve, obeying Nora's every command.

In Nora's pursuit of fame and glory,
 Renee's presence fades into a dull story.
 Never a priority, always on the side,
 Neglected, a feeling she cannot hide.
 Her mother's absence, a constant ache,
 Leaving Renee's soul to slowly break.

2. Strokes of Pain (Poem 8)

Weeks drift by, a mother's absence still,
 Renee finds solace in her social thrill,
 Accepted in the painting club, she starts to feel
 The warmth of friendship, her heart's gentle seal.
 Girls and boys asking for photos,
 Everywhere Renee goes, her mother's shadow, a second skin.
 In the class the people don't speak,
 Only their brushes and knives do,
 Some speak Goya, others Picasso.
 One man joins Renee's seat, wondering which one she is.
 "Neither," she says. "My pain is mine and mine only."
 An intrigued brow paints his face, Oliver is his name.
 "Nice. I absorb my pain like an overused sponge."
 Quick, witty, whispery conversations afloat
 He takes everything as jokes, she takes everything as a sign
 Her mental notes still on fight or flight
 Keeping track of her enemies from Oliver's insights
 Counting days, counting practice to reach the 1st rank

With each criticism from teachers, Renee yearns for her mother's embrace,
 To fill the loveless chasm in her heart, the vacant space.
 In the late hours of the night, she gazes into the mirror,
 her mother's absence couldn't be clearer.
 Laid there by her supply table, the palette knife seems so inviting
 Tears threatening to spill, so she carves one line, upper forearm—
 Turns out the pain is... nothing.
 The second line, she keeps going
 With staggering breaths, she sees blood running,
 A small victory worth celebrated
 Her red, stormy gaze
 Along with her dry cheeks.

3. The Mask of Entitlement (Poem 9)

In her quest to assert herself, Renee took a bold stand,
 Demanding special treatment, her manipulative hand.
 A new mask she wears, a desperate guise,
 To stand out, to be seen through others' eyes,
 Daughter of Nora Skyler, she implies,
 Coming late to class, she insists on sitting front,
 Receiving exemptions galore,
 Citing her lineage, her mother's name, as reasons to implore.
 Never been to a normal school, she forgets to be mindful
 In the canteen, cutting lines become her default
 She is the shiny-diamond student, extra tolerance they must give her!

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Opinions express, class discussion in harmony
 Yet Renee itches to interrupt, turning all attention to her story
 Every lesson is tainted by extravagance or melodrama
 In the softest voice she utters, "I don't want to make this about me, but..."
 Ears perk, eager to listen
 Her friends, initially tolerant, grow weary of her act,
 Despising her entitlement, they can no longer interact.
 Renee's relentless pursuit of praise and validation,
 Drives an invisible wedge between her and her friends, causing frustration.
 So, they pretend, wearing masks to her face,
 Pulling strings to keep her just in place
 Outside of school matter, they refuse to hang out
 Planting seeds of hatred, internet's corner

4. A Mother's Awakening (Poem 18)

Horrified with a fear that has no form,
 Nora knows there is more to fathom.
 "Show me!"
 Bruises dark, secrets stark, on Renee's trembling thighs,
 The pain, the suffering, hidden behind her quiet guise.
 With more attention, a mother should've known, Nora now realizes.
 Renee pushes her mother away, despair in her eyes,
 Under the study desk, the painting knife she takes
 Against her mother she grips it, an echo of her cries
 "Stop telling me what to do."
 The knife trembles in Renee's hand, a symbol of her plight,
 Staring at her mother—darkness and the light,
 She envisions herself trapped in a building, sinking beneath the sea,
 The water filling her lungs,
 But this time she doesn't scream; she lets it be.
 Renee lowers the knife surrendering to the night,
 To her own arm, the pain now taking flight.

5. Where It All Ends (Poem 23)

In the room Renee weeps,
 Upon Nora's schedule, the truth seeps.
 A painful reminder,
 The cycle of neglect, she's learned to fear.
 Her young skin, fair and blood rushed
 Five lines present, turn pink tender—a cold reminder
 That one more is never enough.
 Hurriedly ... fearlessly ... and all alone,
 She hugs herself in hatred.
 Nails scratching deep,
 As if her atoms scream to be let out
 Staring corpse-like at the laptop screen,
 She defies gravity that calls her tears out
 She keeps scratching, scratching, and screaming,
 —weakening reality.
 In the distance she hears her heart cry endlessly.

This is where it all ends,
 Where the healing path is marked

By long-lasting pain. The scars of youth,
They haunt her evermore,
A battle fought within, to mend her core.

CONCLUSION

The creative work explores narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) through Renee's perspective, highlighting the impacts of her mother's authoritarian parenting on her development. Specifically, poems like "Trophies and Echoes of Neglect" (Poem 3) illustrate the consequences of Nora's controlling approach, fostering fear, and driving Renee to overachieve in a quest for love. These experiences contribute to Renee's development of NPD which is shown in Poem 9. Both poems emphasize the significance of balanced parental control and affection in fostering a healthy sense of self-worth. The poems underscore the importance of parents being attuned to their parenting styles and considering the nonverbal reactions of their children. Additionally, the second purpose of the creative work delves into Renee's emotional struggle as she grapples with NSSI as a coping mechanism for her NPD. It aims to reveal that NPD can lead to dangerous coping methods like NSSI, as seen in poems like "Strokes of Pain" (Poem 8) illustrating the ease with which young people with NPD may turn to NSSI. Poem 18 "A Mother's Awakening" further depicts the escalating aggression from NSSI that can arise when individuals, like Renee, are confronted about their vulnerable actions.

The narrative poem concludes with a tragic reminder not to judge individuals with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) who resort to non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) as a coping mechanism. Despite therapeutic efforts and supportive friends, as depicted in Poem 23, Renee continues to choose NSSI in fear of potential neglect. This tragic outcome serves as a stark reflection of the persistence of authoritarian parenting, suggesting that overcoming self-harming behaviors becomes challenging in a society where such parenting practices prevail. The remaining poems that are not addressed here directly contribute to portraying NPD symptoms through Renee's behavior, creating a narrative that explores the disorder's origins and consequences. The creative work aims to provide insight into NPD, emphasizing the need to understand its roots and consequences. Renee's story reflects the potential for growth and transformation, advocating for self-awareness and the presence of supportive relationships in navigating the complexities of personal and social connections for today's youth.

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